

## Trabajo Fin de Grado

### Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon and the Workhouse in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*

Autora

Elsa Adán Hernández

Directora

Maite Escudero Alías

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras  
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## Abstract

The objective of this dissertation is to analyse the mistreatment children received in 19<sup>th</sup> century workhouses as depicted in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. It is the 1834 New Poor Law that frames this essay, and more concretely, Jeremy Bentham and his Utilitarian philosophy highly criticised by Dickens. The work narrows down the focus with a close analysis of the Panoptical penitentiary designed by Bentham and how this architectural form can also be seen in the ruling of the workhouse Oliver Twist spent his childhood in. Likewise, there is further reference to the Panopticon in the light of Foucault's vision of power and punishment. Especial attention is given to the disciplinary methods associated with Bentham's Panopticon through the light of *Oliver Twist*, highlighting four aspects in which the appliance of the premises of Panopticism are clearly transferred from the prison to the ruling of the workhouse. In conclusion, the critique towards Utilitarianism and the implementation of the 1834 New Poor Law amendment is made clear by Dickens through the misfortunes of Oliver and his survival in this particular prison: the workhouse.

## Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar el maltrato que los niños recibían en los asilos para pobres característicos del siglo XIX, tal y como se refleja en la obra de Charles Dickens *Oliver Twist*. La New Poor Law de 1834 cumple con la función de marco para esta disertación, y más concretamente, la filosofía Utilitarista de Jeremy Bentham ferozmente criticada por Dickens. El trabajo se centra en el detallado análisis del Panóptico penitenciario que Bentham diseñó y en cómo esta forma arquitectónica se puede ver reflejada en el gobierno del asilo para pobres en el que Oliver Twist vivió durante su niñez. Igualmente, se realiza un comentario sobre el Panóptico según Foucault y su visión del poder y el castigo. Especial atención se presta a los métodos disciplinarios asociados al Panóptico según se reflejan en *Oliver Twist*, subrayando cuatro aspectos en los que la aplicación de las principales premisas del Panóptico se ven claramente transferidas desde la prisión hasta las normas del asilo. De forma concluyente, Dickens critica de manera clara el Utilitarismo y la implementación de la New Poor Law de 1834 a través de los infortunios de Oliver y la manera de sobrevivir en su prisión particular: el asilo.

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## 1. Introduction

“There was the workhouse, the dreary prison of his youthful days” (Dickens 416). By means of this brief but intense sentence in one of Charles Dickens’s masterpieces the narrator urges readers to lift up their eyes and become aware of the ever-lasting existence of one of the most perturbing blocks of bricks existing in London in the nineteenth century: the workhouse. The main aim of this dissertation is to analyze the depiction of this building as reflected in Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (firstly written and published in 1837), with a special emphasis on the disciplinary methods that characterized the living conditions of the poorest lower classes, paving the way for the concept of the panopticon. For this purpose, I will mainly rely on the implementation of the 1834 Poor Law, focused on the mistreatment of children, as well as on Jeremy Bentham’s vision of the panopticon as a coercive measure designed to control the paupers’ lives.

When labelling the British Victorian era, different ideas are directly brought to the fore: imperialism, rigid Puritan ethics, social Darwinism, double standard of morality, overcrowded industrialized cities or, Utilitarianism and proletariat, just to name but a few<sup>1</sup>. However, other equally relevant terms and issues are often set aside, being unfairly disregarded. It is precisely one of these aspects that will be tackled in this essay from a literary perspective. It is widely accepted that nineteenth century British literature goes hand-in-hand with the history of its people, and more specifically, the working class, which was considered the propelling motor of the upcoming changes along the future decades. A clear example of this statement is *Oliver Twist* himself, who, as explained by Ambery Malkovich, “is born both from and into experience.

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<sup>1</sup> As Ambery Malkovich remarks, some notions that can be also relevant are “the concepts of suffering, begging, longing, starvation, death, loss, and innocence” (10).

He gains knowledge of Victorian life from the perspective of a working class orphaned child, and his initial understandings of life come from disease and death” (98). Yet, society was not only composed of those proletarian people, together with the middle class and the ruling upper class, but also the pauper strata played a significant role in the depiction of what is today understood as Victorian society. This ‘underclass’ group included a large variety of poor people, from beggars to criminals<sup>2</sup>, without forgetting the one forlorn Oliver appertained to: orphans. Without underestimating the miserable living conditions of them all, it could possibly be argued that those of poor orphans were the worst ones since “childhood in the Victorian period was frequently a cruel and brutal experience” (Purchase 15). As a result, criticism over the situation of children rapidly became one of the main concerns for relevant authors of the time, being Charles Dickens one of its first and main exponents. His intentions could not be clearer since, just when reading the first chapter of the novel, the narrator accounts that “Oliver cried lustily. If he could have known that he was an orphan, left to the tender mercies of churchwardens and overseers, perhaps he would have cried the louder” (Dickens 3). Even if poor Oliver is the prominent character whose life and misfortunes the reader has access to, it is significant to name another waif child: Dick. He is depicted by the narrator as being “[Oliver’s] little friend and playmate” (53) and is presented in a pitiful and very telling scene in which he says goodbye to Oliver in his desperate attempt to fly away from the torture they are constantly enduring. Still, the main difference between these two friends is that “Dick accepts his fate, whereas Oliver struggles those elements in culture and society that seek to restrain him” (Malkovich 99), which makes Dick’s life even sadder.

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<sup>2</sup> The novel offers an account of the pauper’s living conditions as well as their reaction to their situation, as can be seen in the following quotation: “Many hunger-worn outcasts close their eyes in our streets, at such times, who, let their crimes have been what they may, can hardly open them in a more bitter world” (Dickens 177).

As stated before, Dickens was not the only intellectual of the time concerned with the problems society had to endure. For instance, Dick's words can run alongside with the description of pauper children carried out by the Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In one of her most sentimental poems titled "The Cry of Children" (1843), she makes the reader hear the children's voices producing the pain in their minds that a spear pierced at the bottom of the heart would. Those who read the poem can do nothing but attend to the horror circus the ruling classes are not willing to react, while the poetic speaker is openly facing them: "Do you question the young children in the sorrow/Why their tears are falling so?" (ll.15-16). Meanwhile, Browning is able to moisten readers' hands with the children's tears who "are weeping bitterly!" (l.12). It is worth commenting on the lines of the poem devoted to little Alice, a feeble girl whose "smile has time of growing in her eyes" (l.50) only when she dies. As hard as it may appear, these children were only able to achieve happiness after death as they themselves recognize ("It is good when it happens," say the children / "that we die before our time!" ll. 53-54).<sup>3</sup> Coincidentally enough, this is exactly what Dick says to Oliver. When he is saying goodbye to his friend and Oliver promises to see him again, Dick's reply could not be more frank: "'I hope so' (...) 'After I am dead, but not before'" (Dickens 54).

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<sup>3</sup> In this poem, Browning uses the issue of politics in order to criticize the passiveness of the government on the situation of the children. More concretely, she explores the creepy conditions pauper children were living and writes down their feelings about life and death. The fact that they consider the end of their lives as the only way of salvation is particularly striking. Specially telling is the line "They know the grief of man, without its wisdom" (l. 143) in which the reader easily appreciates how children are deprived of the most treasured moment of their lives – childhood – and launched into manhood – hence, suffering and misery – too soon.

## 2. The presence of 1834 New Poor Law Amendment in *Oliver Twist*.

If something is highly remarkable in the Victorian period is the outstanding power of politics and its direct effect on the constant reshaping of the population's lives. Nevertheless, before entering a deeper discussion on politics – an issue clearly reflected in *Oliver Twist* – it is necessary to have a limpid idea of the situation the reader is to encounter. As stated by Dickens himself in the preface of the novel, everything that is written in those pages “IS TRUE. Every man who has watched these melancholy shades of life knows it to be so (...) there is not one word exaggerated or over-wrought” (Dickens lvii). This means that he did not attempt to hide any single corner of that harsh reality, something that can be proved all throughout his oeuvre. In this context, one of the most remarkable features is, undoubtedly, the conscious selection of characters. Even if the reader is introduced to some middle and upper class characters such as Mr. Brownlow and his friend Mr. Grimwig, the prominence is given to the poorest ones, and more concretely to those connected to petty crime, which was, as explained by John Benson, a strategy of the paupers to survive as well as begging (27). This petty crime could be performed in very distinct forms, most of them presented in *Oliver Twist*. Just when reading the preface, the reader infers that the novel does not only present a collection of thieves and evildoers such as Fagin or the murderer Sikes, but it also introduces other forms of petty crime such as prostitution. Prostitution points at Nancy, who, even if she is not clearly addressed as a prostitute through the story, she does not only perform as a thief but also as a streetwalker on account of this telling preface in which Dickens states “that boys are pickpockets, and the girl is a prostitute” (liii).

Since the main focus of this essay is addressed to the poorest part of the social scale, at this point it is necessary to introduce the Poor Laws (traced back for the first time in 1536), and more specifically, the Amendment Act of these Laws passed in 1834.

Although both are considered historically relevant, it is through *Oliver Twist*, published three years after the rewriting of the pre-existing laws, that Dickens offers to the reader an overview of the 1834 New Poor Laws and their overall effects on the paupers, as a way of protesting against these incongruous laws. As a result, readers can get a glimpse of the way in which this apparent change to improve and end up with the out-of-door relief system as well as offering a roof to those miserable vagrants was nothing but a failed attempt to change for the better.<sup>4</sup> The passing of New Poor Law Amendment act led to the introduction of a series of changes conceived of as poor relief and its basic ideas. What this ‘new’ amendment “embodied was a tougher attitude to poor relief altogether” (Gill 452). The main concern was to eliminate out-of-door relief and substitute it by a new monstrous institution, the workhouse, a place that, according to Gill, presented conditions that would not be taken by anyone unless there was no other choice (452). As expected, the living conditions standards created an equation which directly pointed to health problems, and it was those living under harsher conditions the ones that suffered the most. As demonstrated by John Benson in some of his statistics accounts: “The fact that the poor generally did the hardest work, received the lower incomes, lived in the worst accommodation and ate the most inadequate diet meant that they also suffered from the poorest health” (104). The denigrating consequences of their implementation are shown throughout Dickens’s work as a means of opening people’s eyes about the harsh reality hidden under this glaring quiet and relief. What lies beneath is the fact that “personal change rather than institutional change is all that is needed” (Stokes 722) making it clear that the main problem did not depend on this law itself but on the way it was executed. By way of illustration, there is a moment in the novel in

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<sup>4</sup> It is acknowledged that “the origins of parochial poor relief extended back at least as far as the fifteenth century”, when the first implementation of outdoor relief started to be noticed (<http://www.workhouses.org.uk/poorlaws/oldpoorlaw.shtml>).



which Mr. Bumble is about to move to London together with “two paupers, who persisted in shivering, and complaining of the cold, in a manner which, Mr. Bumble declared, caused his teeth to chatter in his head, and made him feel quite uncomfortable; although he had a great-coat on” (Dickens 134). The depiction of these children enables the reader to image how unfortunate their lives were, as well as creating a feeling of pity that will be sentimentally enhanced all throughout the book. Knowing that, the poor were bound to live in intolerable conditions, and what is more astonishing, innocent children knew that “the relief [became] inseparable from the workhouse and gruel, and that frightened people” (Dickens 11). As stated in the quotation, and as Browning brought to the fore, it threw them into fright since they were grievously aware of the situation.

### 3. At the workhouse.

Therefore, when studying the living conditions of the outcasts, the workhouse becomes sonorous. This social institution is evoked by “the grim Victorian world of *Oliver Twist*” (<http://www.workhouses.org.uk/>) (See illustrations 1 and 2 in Appendix). As explained by Higginbotham, the first dictionary entry for the word workhouse dates from 1652, being described as “The said house to bee converted for a workhouse for the poore of this cittye and also a house of correction for the vagrant and disorderly people within this cittye” (<http://www.workhouses.org.uk/>). As time passed by, their usage slightly changed, although when the New Poor Law was passed in 1834, workhouses were used to support the modifications fostered by it. Locating *Oliver Twist* in this historical moment leads to the condemnation of this fictitious child to the merciless treatment that took place within those brick buildings. It is true that workhouses provided paupers with food, clothes, work, apparent medical care, and free education for children as well as training in the development of certain working skills.

In fact, Dickens depicts the workhouse as “a regular place of public entertainment for the poorer classes; a tavern where there was nothing to pay; a public breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper all the year round; a brick and mortar elysium, where it was all play and no work” (Dickens 10). It is precisely at this point that Dickens brilliantly uses irony to emphasize those socially hidden issues. By the same token, another instance of irony takes place when Oliver is exposed to the board and falls asleep in a sob; this scene followed by the sharp ironical comment “What a noble illustration of the tender laws of England! They let the paupers go to sleep!” (Dickens 10). Similarly, it is necessary to point out that the paupers were considered nothing but annoyance for the new surging society and were arduously treated as misfits. This is the reason why workhouses were conceived of not only as a place in which several commodities were offered to the homeless but also a correcting institution in which paupers could mend their errors and start a new life through a correct and civilized path (See illustration 3 in Appendix). Therefore, Charles Dickens’s intentions are made explicit in *Oliver Twist*, so much that “though dealing with the New Poor Law only in part, [this work] remains the most famous attack on the system of which the workhouses were the potent symbol” (Gill 451).

Since workhouses became an emblematic building of the nineteenth century, there was no big city of industrialized Britain in which such an institution could not be found. Among all the existing workhouses at that time, it is interesting to devote some lines to the Cleveland Street Workhouse located in London, which seems to have been one of the main sources of inspiration for Dickens in the writing of *Oliver Twist* (See illustration 4 in Appendix). Dickens was forced into labour, aged 11, so he was already aware of the existence of this kind of buildings since he lived in Norfolk Street, the place in which the Cleveland workhouse was set.

As a result, this “must have made a strong impression on young Charles to assess his own fall from grace and the threat of the workhouse must have been horribly concrete” (<http://clevelandstreetworkhouse.org/2011/02/the-black-factory/>). Remarkably enough, everything he saw, suffered, and lived during his childhood in Norfolk Street and his stay in the workhouse has been depicted in the novel, thus launching a critique upon those institutions. Even if this institution only appears in the early chapters of the novel – “touch[ing] upon almost everything that angered those who looked for more humane system of poor relief than obtained under the old rules” (Gill 453) – there are some further references to the New Poor Laws mingled with the narrative of Oliver’s adventures and misfortunes. This is by no means accidental, but Dickens consciously introduced those glimpses into the history of the time in order to create a full account of the political issues affecting the working classes. Besides, in order to depict that harsh reality, Dickens explores Mr. Bumble’s character whose mind should, at first sight, be totally in favour of this implementation. However, after having received his own life lesson, the narrator lets the reader see how Mr. Bumble is “thinking, for the first time, that the poor-laws really were too hard on people” (Dickens 287). There is no more illuminating way to demonstrate the true reality of the times, since it is the same person who effected such cruelty, the one that paradoxically was able to recognize it.

#### 4. Jeremy Bentham and his groundbreaking Panopticon.

Never leaving politics aside, the philosophy of Utilitarianism and one of his leading figures, Jeremy Bentham, deserve some explanation in order to have a deeper understanding of the novel, as it is intrinsically related to the disciplinary methods ruling the workhouse. First of all, it is necessary to comprehend the basic premises of this philosophical trend, well-defined by Glenn Everett:

Utilitarianism is a natural consequence of the rationalism of the French philosophies and the English materialism of Hobbes, Locke, and Hume, and gets its name from Jeremy Bentham's test question, 'What is the use of it?' Bentham (1748-1832), the father of this -ism, conceived the idea when he ran across the words 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' in Joseph Priestly's *Treatise on Government*. This phrase represents the heart of Utilitarianism (or Benthamism), which attempted to reduce decision-making about human actions to a 'felicific calculus' by weighing the profit, convenience, advantage, benefit, emolument, and happiness that would ensue from the action against the mischief, disadvantage, inconvenience, loss, and unhappiness that it would also entail. (<http://victorianweb.org/philosophy/phil1.html>)

Among the main concerns of this Utilitarian trend, the idea of self-interest is of utmost importance for this essay. According to Bentham, all human beings should act conforming to their self-interest, and once this is obtained the maxim of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" would be achieved. As Fielding points out, characters such as Claypole and Fagin would be applying this kind of philosophy themselves (53). Contrary to what can be thought, the idea of self-interest did not only apply to middle or upper class people. As explained by Fielding it was also "members of Fagin's gang [who] are spoken of as if they were philosophers, the simple and essential point being that both they and Benthamite Utilitarians, thought that the right thing to do faced with most questions of conduct was to look after oneself first" (54). By the same token, the following quotation could illustrate Bentham's maxim, in which the idea of self-interest is made explicit by means of using Oliver just as a prop for Mr. Sowerberry to obtain his own benefit:

Mr. Sowerberry was closeted with the board for five minutes; and it was arranged that Oliver should go to him that evening 'upon liking'—a phrase which means, in the case

of a parish apprentice, that if the master find, upon a short trial, that he can get enough work out of a boy without putting too much food into him, he shall have him for a term of years, to do what he likes with. (Dickens 28)

Bentham's Utilitarianism is highly relevant in this essay, since this "apparently calculating philosophy [might be] associated with the way in which workhouses were run" (Fielding 55). Furthermore, it is his groundbreaking concept of the Panopticon, mainly applied to prisons, that becomes useful for my analysis here (See Illustration 5 in Appendix). Even if this building was first thought to control the lives of all the criminals menacing the streets, its structure could also be adapted to different kinds of public institutions, among them, the workhouses. Therefore, the main rules and characteristics that Bentham associated to his utopian architectural form, can also be found in the way workhouses were run. His idea "was to provide the model for all other types of institution: the birth of the prison means the birth of all kinds of normalising procedures, carried out in buildings still very familiar today, that all look exactly like the exterior of the 19<sup>th</sup> century prison" (Tambling 12-13). The Panopticon was at the centre of Bentham's thoughts as a way of controlling outcasts – especially criminals – as well as ameliorating their moral behaviour. As a result, Bentham understood this system as a way of transforming the poor into a new profitable working class group, able to labour and act as another piece of his desired societal puzzle. This is the reason why the idea of punishment runs parallel with the control government should exert, since even if punishment was, no matter in what form, something evil, it was also necessary: "No punishment, no government; no government, no political society" (Semple 25). Another idea somehow hidden behind the Panopticon was the concept brought by Bentham that all the poor should be controlled by a central authority and so, individualism would be eradicated with the attempt of judging and controlling the poor

as a group, what highlights Bentham's barbarity. (Stokes 712). If the Panopticon occupied Bentham's programme, there is another term related to the concept of self-interest, that is, individualism. For him, "the idea of the free will of the individual is fiction, and the humane must be institutional" (Stokes 713). As asserted before, the Panoptical penitentiary could also be adapted to different public buildings with the aim of grouping and controlling individuals. Consequently, workhouses were considered as an offer to solve the problems caused by familial instability, from an individual scope to the sphere of class arrangement in society (Stokes 716).

Moreover, it is interesting to highlight that this Benthamite Panopticon was retaken by another well-known philosopher one century later, Michel Foucault, who describes the Panopticon as an:

enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead – all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. (216) (See Illustrations 6 and 7 in Appendix).

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) Foucault explores the birth of the modern prison as a form of punishment for criminals and the development of harsh forms of discipline throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as new measures to control human bodies. According to Foucault, it is the human body itself that institutions like prisons attempt to control. Other institutions such as schools, hospitals, asylums and factories also became places for exerting coercive practices in order to control prisoners,

students, patients, madmen or madwomen, workers, etc. Foucault takes Bentham's architectural building of the Panopticon as an example of the mechanisms of control and discipline that society exerts upon individuals.<sup>5</sup> One of the main ideas of the Foucaultian discourse is that power has become ubiquitous, very much like the monitoring supervision of the Panopticon. He speaks of "its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives" (39). Power, in this way, creates subjects who are dependent on economic, political and social measures of control, distributing not only their spatial and temporal movements but also regulating their moral behaviour. So, Foucault describes a set of strict rules that prisoners were obliged to comply with in 19<sup>th</sup> century prisons: from working hard for nine hours a day, dressing and eating in silence to reading religious prayers in order to obtain a ration of bread (6). What is interesting for my essay is the analogy between Bentham's Panopticon and Foucault's analysis of coercive regulations of human bodies as mere objects at the hands of powerful institutions. In the case of *Oliver Twist*, it is obvious that Oliver and the other children living in the workhouse are subjected to nothing but an unhappy life. As the narrator clearly writes down: "the simple fact was, that Oliver, instead of possessing too little feeling, possessed rather too much; and was in a fair way of being reduced, for life, to a state of brutal stupidity and sullenness by the ill usage he had received" (Dickens 29). Mistreatment towards orphan children as well as the total exertion of control over them was a common practice, and it is precisely this idea Foucault reshapes from Bentham the one Dickens criticizes, "reject[ing] altogether any institutional management of the

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<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, Stokes claims that "like the family, Bentham's institution nurtures as much as it controls" (717) which perfectly embodies the omnipresent presence of power exposed by Foucault.

poor, in favor of a more natural personal and humane relationship between the classes” (Stokes 712).

As has been explained above, irony is one of those treasured narrative techniques Dickens employed. He did not only use it to tackle workhouses’ terrifying conditions, but also to criticise those philosophers who followed Bentham’s trend. There is a passage in the novel which thoroughly illustrates Dickens’s witty use of irony as a hidden slander, when the narrator states that:

the freedom of the subject and the liberty the individual are among the first and proudest boasts of a truehearted Englishman; so, I need hardly beg the reader to observe, that this action should tend to exalt them in the opinion of all public and patriotic men; in almost as great a degree as this strong proof of their anxiety for their own preservation and safety, goes to corroborate and confirm the little code of laws which certain profound and sound-judging philosophers have laid own as the mainsprings of all Nature’s deeds and actions: the said philosophers very wisely reducing the good lady’s proceedings to matters of maxim and theory: and, by a very neat and pretty compliment to her exalted wisdom and understanding, putting entirely out of sight any considerations of heart, or generous impulse and feeling. (Dickens 91)

The word “feeling” refers to the way in which Bentham had constructed his own appearance and portrait among the general public, since he was regarded as someone who “championed selfishness in the crudest sense of the word” (Gill 477), therefore, being deprived of any kind of human feelings.



## 5. The hidden panoptical structure of Oliver's workhouse.

Among the different measures that could be expected to be taken in the management of the prison, and by extension also at the workhouse, there are four distinct aspects highlighted in the novel: the treatment of bastard children, the lack of proper medical care, the tedious diet and the guards' tyranny (Gill 453-4). In what follows, I will explore these four measures in view of Bentham's Panopticon, thus drawing the similarities that give rise to understanding the workhouse as a metaphorical prison of creepy conditions.

First of all, it is necessary to acknowledge the birth conditions of our miserable protagonist, whose depiction in the first chapter of the novel is stated in a crystal-clear way: "he was badged and ticketed, and fell into his place at once – a parish child – the orphan of a workhouse – the humble half-starved drudge – to be cuffed and buffeted through the world – despised by all, and pitied by none" (Dickens 3). Right from the beginning, the treatment of bastard children can be appreciated. Oliver's life seems to be ruined only because of his murky and mysterious origins, being inserted into a group of "dreadful creeturs, that are born to be murderers and robbers from their very cradle" (Dickens 47) as well as the dubious reputation of his mother. Due to the conditions implanted by the 1834 New Poor Laws, the complete care of the children was left upon their mothers.<sup>6</sup> Since Oliver's mother died after giving birth to her child, his destiny was shortly after written for him: he was bound to live in a workhouse. Therefore, in *Oliver Twist*, workhouses are engraved with negative connotations, and are easily understood as a kind of prison Oliver is condemned to spend his days in.

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<sup>6</sup> As Gill explains one of the main critiques Dickens exposes in *Oliver Twist* is "the bastardy clauses in the new legislation" (453). As he points out, even if that may seem surprising, after the implementation of the New Poor Laws in 1834, it was the mother the one in charge of taking care of her babies in every single aspect of their lives. This was mainly fostered since the activity of trying to find out who was the father of the little ones demanded a lot of time.

As explained by Semple “the penitentiary is studied as one of the institutions that were emerging (...) to discipline the poor” (9). Besides, another relevant aspect is the fact that paupers, as well as criminals, were considered a different kind of beings, not even fully human, a central idea for Bentham’s Panopticon (Semple 29). As a result, as Noah Claypole himself pejoratively utters to Oliver “But yer must know, Work’us, yer mother was a regular right-down bad’un” (Dickens 44), Oliver is condemned from birth to enter this underclass group, considering all the negative connotations that have been ‘tattooed’ on his skin as a consequence of “com[ing] of a bad family” as Claypole haughtily states (Dickens 51). Even if by the end of the novel the reader assists to the narrator’s revelation of the real origins of Oliver and his mother, Noah, among other characters, does not hesitate to depict her as a similar being to Nancy, something that really infuriates Oliver: “At this point of Mr. Bumble’s discourse, Oliver, just hearing enough to know that some further allusion was being made to his mother, recommenced kicking, with a violence that rendered every other sound inaudible” (Dickens 51). Here arises the well-known figure of the imperfect child who is clearly embodied by Oliver Twist. According to Malkovich, this prototype of character is “predominantly innocent at heart (...) remain[ing], however, exposed to the harsh realities of Victorian life” (7). Besides, not only were paupers doomed to suffering by their birth conditions but also by the continuous vicious attack they had to bear from their superiors, in this case, people such as the beadle Mr. Bumble or Mrs. Mann. There are several moments in the novel in which the way our main protagonist and his friends are addressed to perfectly exemplify this point, so as when the parish authorities resolved that

Oliver should be farmed, or, in other words, that he should be despatched to a branch-workhouse some three miles off, where twenty or thirty juvenile offenders against the poor-laws rolled about the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or

too much clothing, under the parental superintendence of an elderly female, who received the culprits at and for the consideration of sevenpence-halfpenny per small head per week. (Dickens 4)

Interestingly, this quotation points to both an accurate description and careful use of vocabulary. The fact that poor and orphan children were “farmed”<sup>7</sup> illustrates that children were equated to animals, therefore, being treated as such, in the same line that the verb “despatch” is presumably used in a pejorative way. Besides, some other young people are also described as offenders and culprits, accentuating the fact that they did not care about anything. Moreover, Oliver is constantly depicted in a negative way by different characters who use words like “mad”, “fool” or “idle”, such as when Noah Claypole shouts that “Oliver’s gone mad!” (Dickens 44) or the moment in which he asserts that “that audacious young savage would come to be hung!” (Dickens 49). Equally, Oliver is addressed by Claypole as “yer idle young ruffian!” (Dickens 33) and, at a point, the narrator says “whenever the Dodger or Charles Bates came home at night, empty-handed, he would expatiate with great vehemence on the misery of idle and lazy habits” (Dickens 70). Moreover, the way in which Charlotte angrily gushes at Oliver after his fight with Noah Claypole is also telling: “Oh you little un-grate-ful, mur-de-rous, hor-rid vil-lain!” (Dickens 47). Drawing some parallel with the Panoptical penitentiary, these ‘attributes’ given to the paupers were the same attached to criminals. As Foucault explains: “It is polyvalent in its applications; it serves to reform prisoners, but also (...) to put beggars and idlers to work” (Tambling 14).

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<sup>7</sup> As Gill explains “the system of contracting out the care of pauper infants was one of the scandals of the Victorian Era. Death rates were extremely high. George Cruikshank claimed that it was he who drew Dickens’s attention to an inquiry into a case of abuse of children ‘farmed out’ in 1836, which was fully reported in *The Times*” (462).

Retaking the idea of the overgeneralised madness all paupers were supposed to suffer from, there is a passage in which Mrs. Sowerberry explains Mr. Bumble that Oliver “must be mad” (Dickens 50). This statement is counterattacked with Mr. Bumble’s answer, who replies that “‘It’s not Madness, ma’am’ (...) ‘it’s Meat’”, after which he goes on explaining that Oliver’s *madness* stems from his overfeeding, since as he blurts out: “You’ve raised an artificial soul and spirit in him, (...) If you had kept the boy on gruel, ma’am, this would never have happened” (Dickens 51). It is precisely that, hunger, another point criticized by Dickens, since diet and eating conditions were absolutely deficient. Not only the inhabitants of the workhouse were fed almost exclusively by gruel which could not provide a healthy diet, but also the scarce quantities given to them could only lead to health problems and fatal consequences. In fact, “it was the monotony of the workhouse diet that was its most depressing feature” (May 22) (See Illustrations 8, 9 and 10 in Appendix). There are several instances in the novel in which gruel is brought to the fore, specially the heartbreaking scene in which the description of eating conditions is highly revealing:

Of this festive composition each boy had one porringer, and no more—except on occasions of great public rejoicing, when he had two ounces and a quarter of bread besides. The bowls never wanted washing. The boys polished them with their spoons till they shone again; and when they had performed this operation (which never took very long, the spoons being nearly as large as the bowls), they would sit staring at the copper, with such eager eyes, as if they could have devoured the very bricks of which it was composed; employing themselves, meanwhile, in sucking their fingers most assiduously, with the view of catching up any stray splashes of gruel that might have been cast thereon. Boys have generally excellent appetites. Oliver Twist and his companions suffered the tortures of slow starvation for three months. (Dickens 11-12)

This last sentence deserves special attention because it comprises the idea of the kind of building a workhouse actually was; that is, a place in which torture and punish could take varied forms as if it was a prison, being all of them equally excruciating. In order to make these dreary conditions more explicit, there is another passage in the novel in which those ‘intelligent’ philosophers explain the eating conditions of the workhouse:

So, [the members of the board] established the rule, that all poor people should have the alternative (...), of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it. With this view, they contracted with the water-works to lay on an unlimited supply of water; and with a corn-factor to supply periodically small quantities of oatmeal; and issued three meals of thin gruel a day, with an onion twice a week, and half a roll of Sundays. (Dickens, 10-11)

What lies beneath, as openly stated, is just that paupers did not have any access to an adequate diet, but they suffered the same conditions as if being homeless, with the only difference that they were to sicken from starvation in a gradual, slow and ailing way. As Semple puts it: “Bentham was insisting that the three components were inseparable: ‘Solitude, Darkness, and Hard Diet form a compact and consistent body of discipline that ought not to be severed” (34). In this sense, there is a passage in the novel that brings together this fact and the famine issue:

Oliver, whose eyes had glistened at the mention of meat, and who was trembling with eagerness to devour it, replied in the negative; and a plateful of coarse broken victuals was set before him [...]. I wish some well-fed philosopher, whose meat and drink turn to gall within him; whose blood is ice, whose heart is iron; could have seen Oliver Twist clutching at the dainty viands that the dog had neglected. I wish he could have witnessed the horrible avidity with which Oliver tore the bits asunder with all the ferocity of famine. There is only one thing I should like better; and that would be to see

the Philosopher making the same sort of meal himself, with the same relish. (Dickens 31)

Here, not only the issue of desperate hunger is made explicit once again, but the attack upon Utilitarian beliefs is brought to the foreground in a piercing way.

The lack of medical care, which “in the mid-Victorian workhouse was often very basic” (Higginbotham 18) stands for another coercive measure against the poor. As mentioned in the introduction, Dick represents an evident example of the lack of medical care in the workhouses’ system, since once the doctor acknowledges he is going to die, nobody does nothing for him, letting him get worse and worse till the end of his life. Likewise, the presence of disease and death in the Victorian world “were inherent social issues found throughout society” (Malkovich 89). Words can be very telling; for instance, the way in which Oliver is addressed as “little bag o’ bones” (Dickens 30) not only denotes a disrespect towards him as an inferior being but it also makes reference to his skinny complexion and lack of health. When Oliver’s mother gives birth to him, her corpse is examined by a surgeon who “leaned over the body, and raised the left hand. ‘The old story’, he said, ‘no wedding-ring’, I see (...) It is very likely it *will* be troublesome” (Dickens 3). As inferred, such an uncaring attitude was omnipresent in the historical period, as far as doctors were concerned, something that went hand in hand with the way doctors were chosen: “[they] were appointed by Unions after competitive tender and Boards almost invariable went for the cheapest” (Gill 453). Moreover, it is interesting to point out how not only doctors, but also some further medical stuff was badly paid. According to Trevor May “the arrangement for the sick in the workhouse were originally rudimentary, and nursing was placed in the hands of female inmates who might be rewarded with gin for performing some of the more unpleasant tasks such as lying out the dead” (16).

Likewise, this lack of medical care took place both within the workhouse and outside its walls. In chapter 5, the reader witnesses the macabre description of the way corpses were treated, while Oliver sees for the first time a corpse lying on the ground together with the mother of the girl crying desperately. As the undertaker states – being the mistreatment of corpses brought to the fore – not even the worms would want to eat the dead lady since “she is so worn away” (Dickens 39). What follows is a critique to the deficient treatment this young woman has received:

I never knew how bad she was, till the fever came upon her; and then her bones were starting through the skin. There was neither fire nor candle; she died in the dark—in the dark! She couldn’t even see her children’s faces, though we heard her gasping out their names. (...) When I came back, she was dying; and all the blood in my heart has dried up, for they starved her to death. I swear it before the God that saw it! They starved her!’ (...) ‘She was my daughter,’ said the old woman, nodding her head in the direction of the corpse; and speaking with an idiotic leer, more ghastly than even the presence of death in such a place. (Dickens 39)

As far as the guards’ tyranny is concerned, this issue is made visible specially in the character of Mr Bumble. As the narrator depicts him: “He had a decided propensity for bullying; derived no inconsiderable pleasure from the exercise of petty cruelty; and, consequently was (it is needless to say) a coward” (Dickens 287). No matter how insignificant could a mistake of the paupers be, those in power did not take a single minute of delay in order to punish those non-human criminals. In fact, another key point for Bentham’s Panopticon in relation to punishment were the 12 principles that should be followed in order to be adequate and effective: i.e. “[punishment] should be exemplary to deter others” (Semple 26). Coincidentally enough, this is what happens to Oliver when, for the first time, being desperately hungry he utters the illustrious

sentence “Please, sir, I want some more” (Dickens 12) which epitomizes the harshness of the regime that was applied to the new workhouses. What follows after this innocent request is a scene of horror and fear from the boys and perplexity from the assistants, who did not believe what they had just witnessed. The result of Oliver’s challenging claim was a punishment that would be exemplary enough so that the rest of boys did not venture to do the same; “Oliver was ordered into instant confinement; and a bill was next morning pasted on the outside of the gate, offering a reward of five pounds to anybody who would take Oliver Twist off the hands of the parish” (12-5). It is afterwards that Oliver’s punishment is explained in a detailed way, making it explicit that punishments should be exemplary: “As for society: he was carried every other day into the hall where the boys dined, and there sociably flogged as a public warning and example” (16). Furthermore, certain words such as “prisoner”, “gloom” or “loneliness” are highlighted in order to emphasize the kind of disciplinary methods used by those in power, since, as stated by Purchase, the nineteenth century saw the growth of a new increasingly rigorous disciplinary societal organisation, boosting the role surveillance played in it (70). On the top of that, in order to close this explanation there is a brief but telling quotation that encapsulates many of the issues analysed in previous paragraphs. The narrator states: “They had been beaten, and starved, and shut up together, many and many a time” (Dickens 53) making it clear that they – that is, Oliver and Dick, taking this role as the embodiment of the rest of pauper children – have suffered hunger, humiliation and harshness in all ways possible all throughout their childhood.



## 6. Conclusion

As explained in this essay, the workhouse in Victorian England is inevitably linked to certain humiliating attitudes and grievous characteristics that defined it. Workhouses did not usually lead to good outcomes and even if blissful and tender stories could also be accounted for in an insignificant paragraph of some workhouses' history books, it would be those full of sorrow and pain the ones that would stick in the front cover. This idea was put forward by Dickens in *Oliver Twist* and it was enhanced even more by drawing an analogy between the workhouse and the most feared institution by paupers: the Benthamite Panoptical prison, overtly showcasing the concepts of punishment and suffering. As I have tried to demonstrate throughout this dissertation, the workhouse could be assimilated with a real prison, since the conditions under which paupers survived could be equated to those the worst evildoers living in a 19<sup>th</sup> century British prison were doomed to suffer. This has been made explicit by bringing to light four of the aspects that Dickens harshly criticised in *Oliver Twist* as its particular way to censure the appliance of the 1834 New Poor Laws Amendment. By assimilating the workhouse with the Panopticon, and what is more, with the idea of power explored by Michel Foucault, as explained by Semple, "power [in the workhouse] is visible but shrouded, unverifiable and disindividualized. Those subject to power have no knowledge of it, no control over it, but are themselves the subject of knowledge and control" (115). This quotation perfectly summarizes the main idea hidden under Bentham's Panoptical concept, something perfectly visible in the workhouse Oliver spends his days in. Therefore, being Oliver the guide of this adventure, together with his companions and enemies, the reader can get a clear idea of this sharp criticism, creating a crystal-clear view of the mistreatment exerted towards paupers Bentham tried to hide under his apparent care for the poorest strata of society. As a result, while Utilitarianism

was conceived of as a profitable ideology, the real effects that the “Panoptical workhouse” brought by its side were poverty and vulnerability, together with feelings of impersonality and annihilation paupers were condemned to. Bentham’s Utilitarian ideology was an ambivalent tool of regulation for, while it aimed at discipline and the safeguarding of inmates, it also overlooked their humanity and suffering, thus making them dream of a better life only beyond death. Since the final word here must be Dickens’s, in order to state that the workhouse will always remain in Oliver’s mind as one of his most dreadful memories, nothing has nor would ever change, since “there was nearly everything as if he had left it but yesterday, and all his recent life has been but a happy dream” (Dickens 417).

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## 8. Appendix: List of Illustrations



Illustration 1: City of London workhouse from the north-west, c.1907.

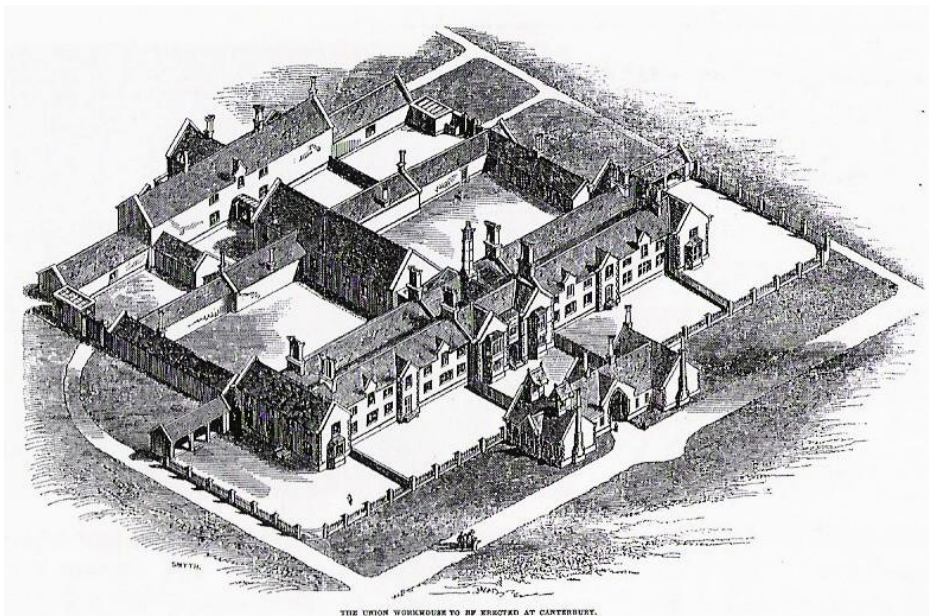


Illustration 2: Bird's-eye view of Canterbury workhouse, Kent, designed by Henry Walter in 1846.

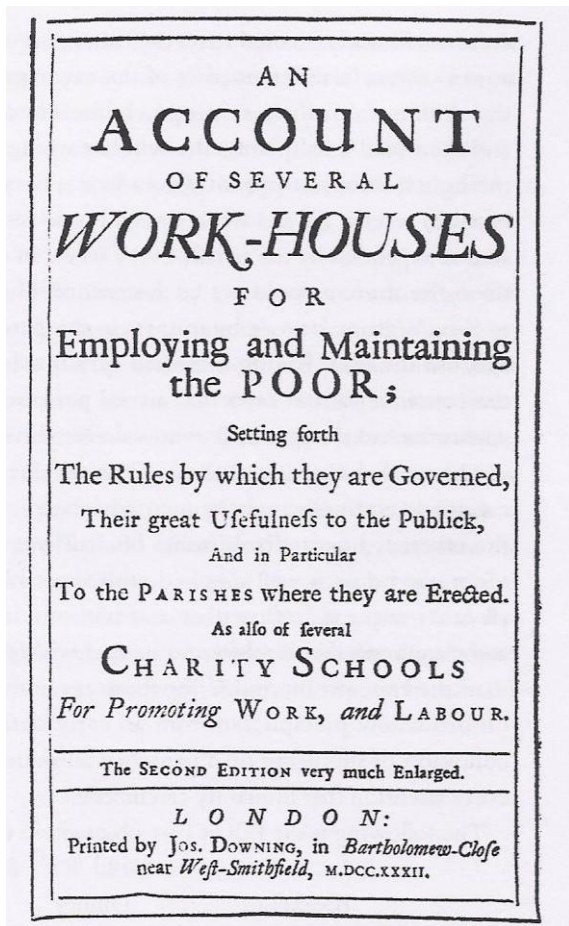


Illustration 3: The title page of *An Account of Several Work-houses*, here in its enlarged second edition of 1732.



Illustration 4: The Cleveland Street Workhouse



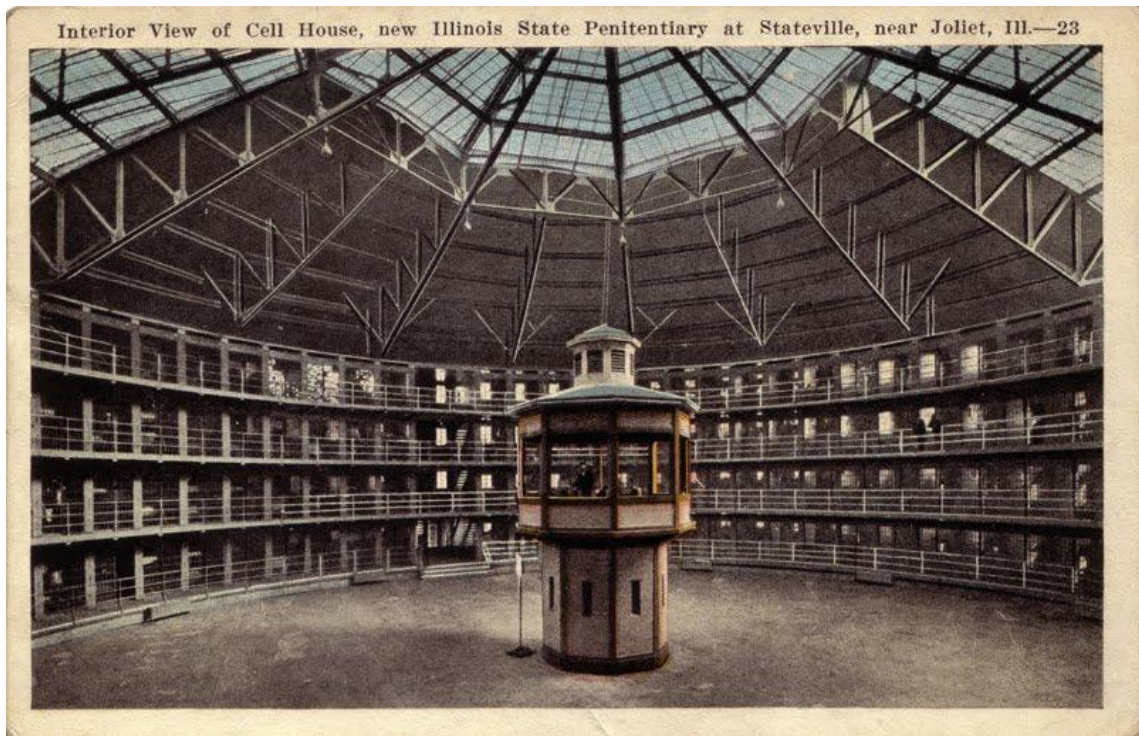


Illustration 5: Interior View of Cell House, new Illinois State Penitentiary at Stateville.

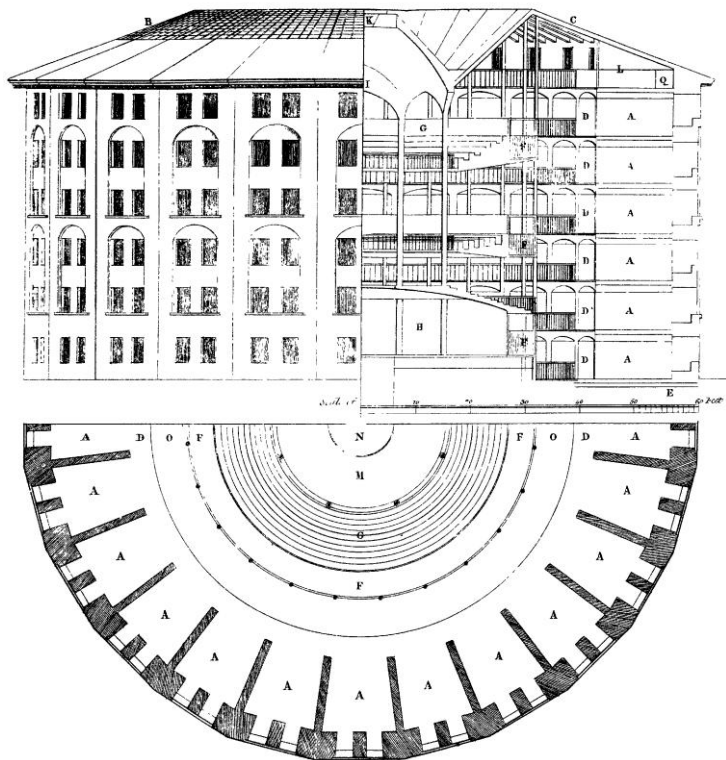
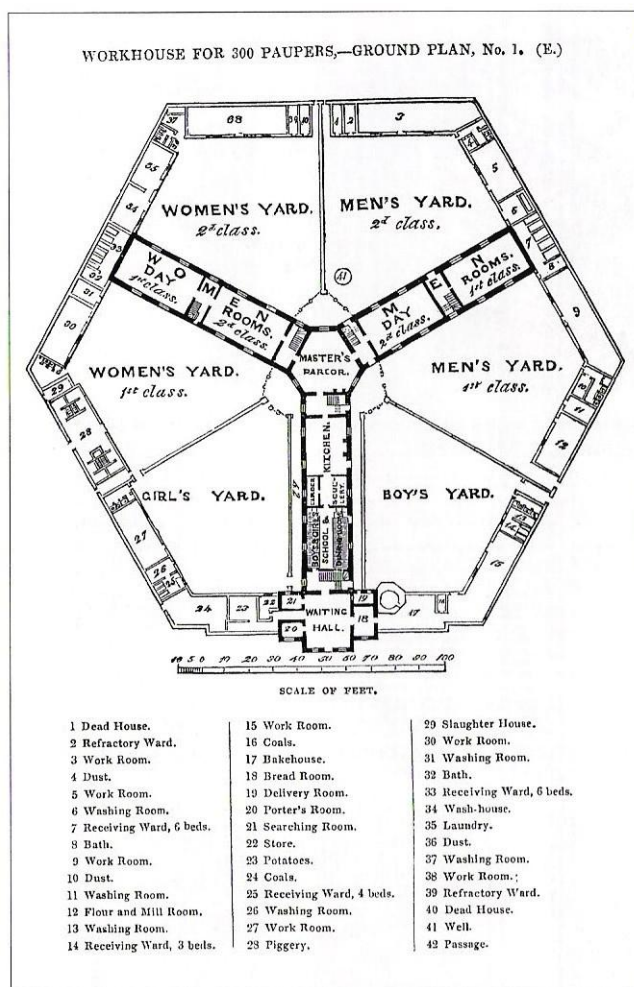


Illustration 6: The Panopticon



The first Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners in 1835 contained this hexagonal plan, sometimes referred to as the 'Kempthorne star'.

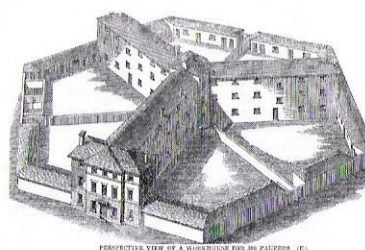


Illustration 7: The structure of a Workhouse.



# DIETARY

## of

### The Workhouse of the Berkhamsted Union

The General Dietary										Aged, Infirm, and Sick Dietary									
	Breakfast		Dinner				Supper		Breakfast		Dinner				Supper				
	Bread. oz.	Gruel. pints.	Beef. oz.	Soup. pints.	Suet Pud oz.	Potatoes lb	Cheese. oz.	Broth. pints.	Bread. oz.	Gruel. pints.	Beef or Mutton lb	Potatoes lb	Soup. pints.	Rice Pud oz.	Cheese. oz.	Broth. pints.	Men & Women		
MONDAY	14	1.5	5	-	-	1	-	1.5	10	1.5	5	1	-	-	-	1.5	Tea to be made by the Matron, and one Pint to be given to each Person		
TUESDAY	14	1.5	-	1.5	-	-	2	-	10	1.5	-	-	1.5	-	2	-	twice a day with Bread & Butter, in lieu of Gruel or Broth.		
WEDNESDAY	14	1.5	5	-	-	1	-	1.5	10	1.5	5	1	-	-	-	1.5			
THURSDAY	14	1.5	-	1.5	-	-	2	-	10	1.5	-	-	1.5	-	2	-			
FRIDAY	8	1.5	-	-	14	-	2	-	10	1.5	-	-	-	10	2	-			
SATURDAY	14	1.5	5	-	-	1	-	1.5	10	1.5	5	1	-	-	-	1.5			
SUNDAY	14	1.5	-	1.5	-	-	2	-	10	1.5	-	-	1.5	-	2	-			

Illustration 8: Dietary in the Workhouse of the Berkhamsted Union.

	Breakfast	Dinner	Supper
Sunday	Sheeps Head Broth	Beef, Pudding, and Broth	What's left at Noon
Monday	Beef Broth	Oatmeal Hasty Pudding with a quarter of a Pound of Butter to a Mess	Bread Butter or Cheese
Tuesday	Hasty Pudding <sup>68</sup>	Three bak'd Ox Cheeks	What's left at Dinner
Wednesday	Ox Cheek Broth	Pease Porridge	Bread, Cheese and Butter
Thursday	Hot Pease Porridge	Beef & Broth	What's left at Dinner
Friday	Beef Broth	Milk Porridge	Bread and Cheese
Saturday	Milk Porridge	Sheep's Head for each Mess	What's left at Dinner

Illustration 9: A Bill of Fare.

	Breakfast	Dinner	Supper
Sunday	Milk-pottage	Bread-puddings, beef, bread, broth, and roots.	Beer and bread, with cheese, or butter.
Monday	Ditto.	Bread, and pease-pottage.	Ditto.
Tuesday	Ditto.	Bread-puddings, beef, bread, broth, and roots.	Ditto.
Wednesday	Ditto.	Frumenty of wheat, and milk.	Ditto.
Thursday	Ditto.	Same as Tuesday.	Ditto.
Friday	Ditto.	Suet-pudding.	Ditto.
Saturday	Ditto.	Dumplings, with sauce, composed of vinegar, sugar, and water.	Ditto.

Illustration 10: Account of a weekly diet; a Bill of Fare observed in a workhouse.